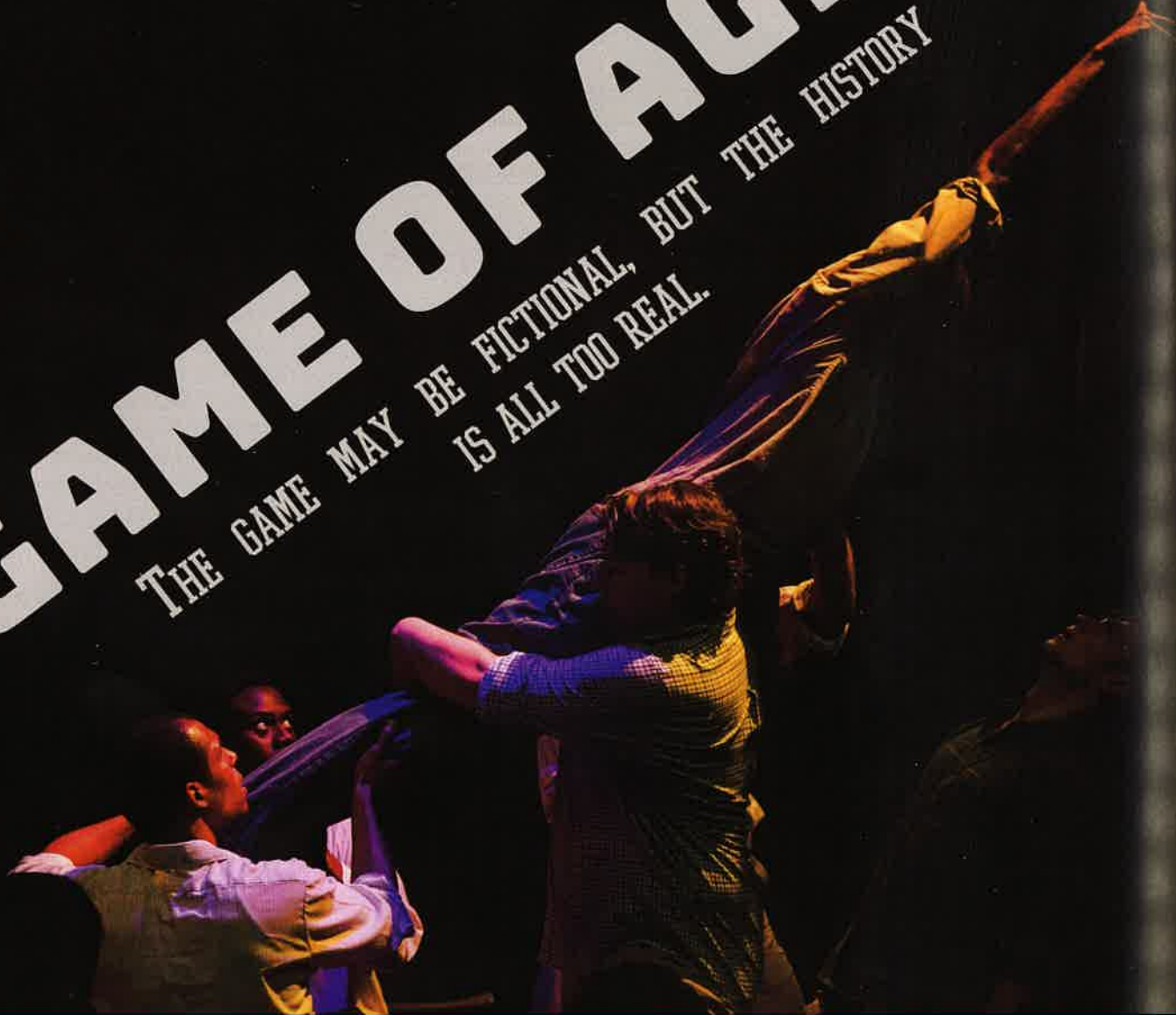


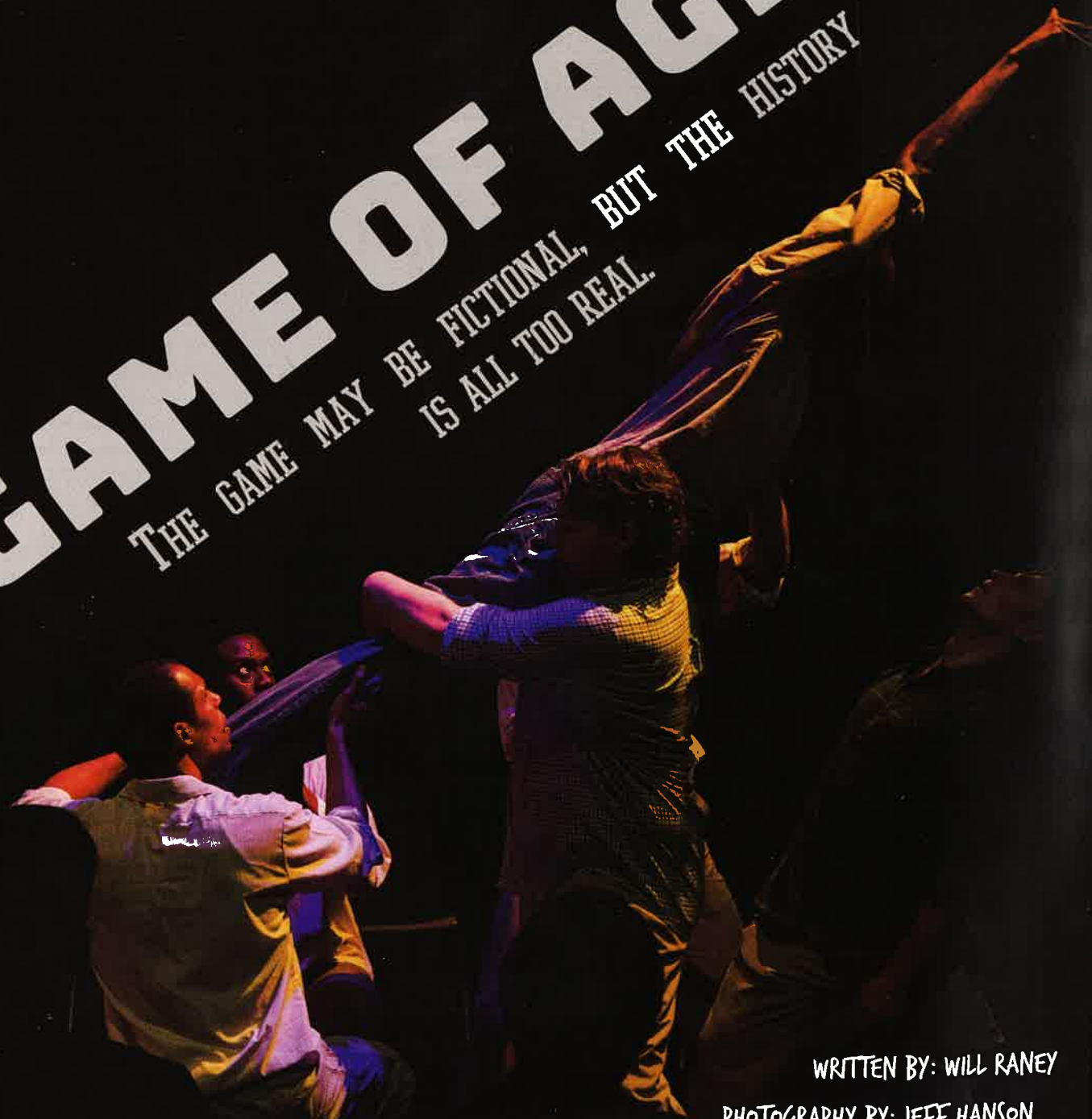
# GAME OF AGES

THE GAME MAY BE FICTIONAL, BUT THE HISTORY  
IS ALL TOO REAL.



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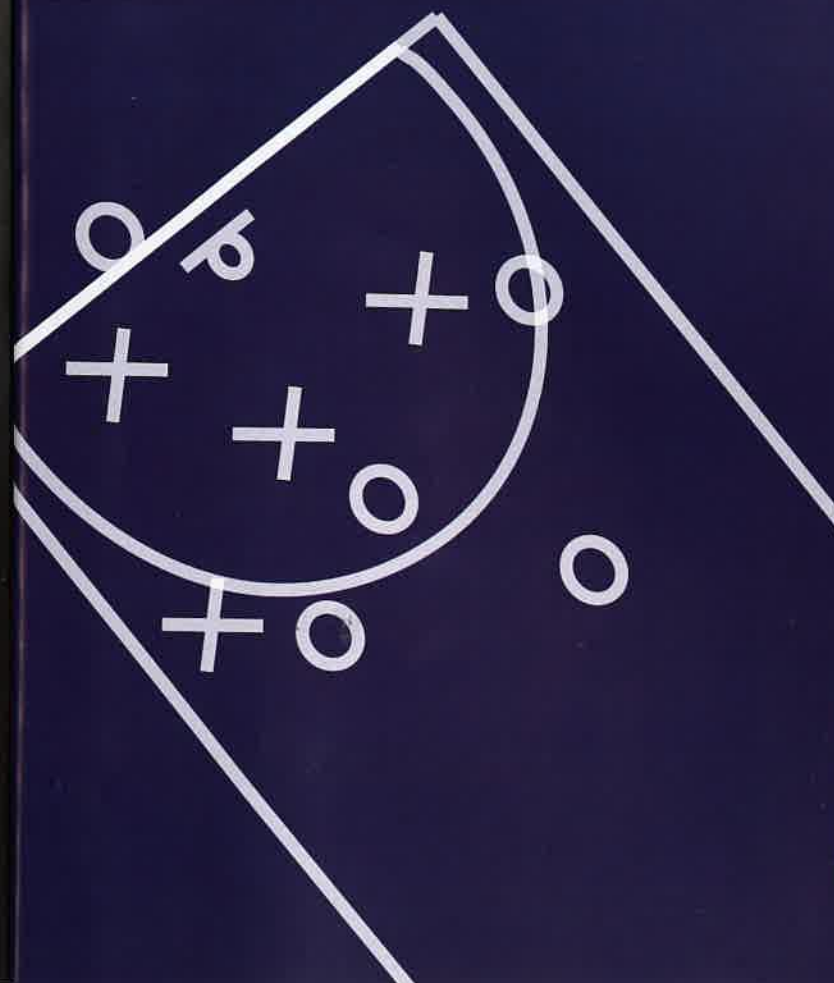
The year is 1951. Riots emerge in the city of Cicero, Illinois in the wake of a black family moving into an all-white suburb of Chicago. It will be three years until *Brown v. Board of Education* is brought before the Supreme Court and four before Emmett Till is lynched at the age of 14 in Mississippi.

The year is 1951 and a basketball game is being played in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. One team is black. The other team is white. The court is public, but segregated.

The ensuing game and the conversations that spurred from it are the focus of "Separate and Equal," the new production from playwright and director Seth Panitch, head of the BFA and MFA acting programs at The University of Alabama. The play ran at the Marian Galloway Theatre from Aug. 28 - 31 before moving to New York City for a month-long run at 59E59 Theaters. The concept for the story came from a visit to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, whose Oral History Project aims to accurately record and preserve the spoken accounts of black Americans affected by the Jim Crow-era South.

"At the Institute, I came across a book of codes regarding segregation - what rules had to be enforced and where blacks were allowed to be under what conditions," Panitch said. "I got the idea of a basketball game and thought, what if one of these codes was broken? What if somebody slipped up?"

The basketball game is played throughout the production, but rather than use an actual basketball, which Panitch notes "could fly into the audience and knock someone's head off," dance is used as a medium to convey the events of the game with choreography from Lawrence Jackson, an assistant professor of dance at UA.



The ball being passed back and forth between teams, Panitch noted, serves in many ways as a metaphor for the percussive history of race relations in the American South.

Though many of Panitch's duties at UA center around acting, productions like "Separate and Equal" allow him the opportunity to experience the theater through the lens of a director, a writer, and a producer. Rather than view these as distinct roles, these different facets of Panitch's career inform one another within a larger dramatic scope.

"I find in many ways that my acting informs my directing since I am able to understand the language an actor needs to appropriately transition into a character," Panitch said. "As a writer, I have to understand the dynamics of all the characters together, which helps the director in me better piece these actors together into a cohesive scene."

Lawrence Jackson served as a collaborator on the play and designed the choreography of the basketball game.

"I wanted to develop a movement vocabulary that would strike a balance between dancer and pedestrian," Jackson said. "I incorporated large leaps and jumps inspired by some of the most memorable maneuvers in NBA history."

Jackson utilized choreographic techniques to exemplify the qualities presented in Panitch's characters. "I emphasized the downbeats through the work to portray young, aggressive, volatile male energy on the court," he said. Jackson's work is evident of how tightly wound the different aspects of the play are, like music, dance and writing.

A fight breaks out between basketball players in "Separate and Equal."



"Separate and Equal" made us of both actors brought from outside Tuscaloosa and those from UA's Department of Theatre and Dance. Though originating the play in Tuscaloosa was a financial decision, Panitch mentioned that allowing the visiting actors the opportunity to explore Alabama made an indelible impact on the roles they would soon play.

"I took all of them to the Civil Rights Institute, and a few of them even took the time to visit the lynching memorial in Montgomery. This gave us a huge advantage that, in the end, greatly assisted the culture of the project as we understood," Panitch said. "We do all we can to simulate how the outside world is going to be. It really is like a lab."

Working at the pace of a professional is something Panitch hopes to expose students to through productions like this. In the outside world of theater, Panitch said that actors are restricted to relatively small windows of time for rehearsal, so a great deal of preparation must be brought to the table right from the beginning.

These ideas are exemplified through the Bridge Project, an idea Panitch hatched in 2006, which helps to connect the end of undergraduate theater study to a career on a nationwide scale. "Separate and Equal" is the fifth production that has allowed UA students the opportunity to perform off-Broadway through the project. Michael Luwoye, a product of the Bridge Project under Panitch, is currently playing the role of Alexander Hamilton in "Hamilton" on Broadway.

Panitch expected there to be two audiences to his play: the one in Tuscaloosa, who would view the events as factual, and the one in New York City, who would view the events as theoretical. This model has proved to be more complicated than this; many of the play-goers up north deeply resonated with the message conveyed in the story.

"What I want the average audience to understand is how much effort is required to separate people," Panitch said. "Here, it is with a system of codes. It proves to me that our natural position is to be brothers and sisters— that it should feel wrong to be separated." After its run off-Broadway, "Separate and Equal" does not have plans to be put on elsewhere, but Panitch is hopeful. He wants to tell the same story in the form of a film, a medium he is no stranger to. Until then, the audiences of the play will have to savor what they can of this narrative.



"I WANTED TO DEVELOP A MOVEMENT VOCABULARY THAT WOULD STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN DANCER AND PEDESTRIAN," JACKSON SAID. "I INCORPORATED LARGE LEAPS AND JUMPS INSPIRED BY SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE MANEUVERS IN NBA HISTORY."